

different school districts spread strategically across the country to achieve maximum national impact.

When Kopp arrived at Professor Marvin Bressler's office at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Bressler didn't want to talk much about the thesis, which he had already graded A. Instead, he demanded to know how she thought she was going to raise \$2.5 million. "Do you know how hard it is to raise twenty-five *hundred* dollars?" he asked. Kopp had a quick answer because she'd already thought about that, too: She was sure that Ross Perot, the billionaire from back home in Dallas who had been involved in efforts to improve Texas schools, would love the idea.

It would take a year before Kopp even got a meeting with Perot. But by 2010, Teach For America would be in its twentieth year, a year in which it would raise \$216 million in contributions, grants, and other funds. With nine thousand corps members in public school districts or charter schools, TFA would be the largest single employer of students in Princeton's—and Yale's and Harvard's—graduating class, drawing applications from an astounding 15–18 percent of all three schools' seniors.

Kopp's proposal for a "Teacher Corps" argued that as a result of the report *A Nation At Risk* and the persistence of low national test scores, "the American education system has become the preoccupation of the media and of the nation's business and government leaders."

For drama, she quoted a recent *Fortune* magazine article that had one-upped *A Nation At Risk*'s doomsday talk: "It's like Pearl Harbor. The Japanese have invaded and the U.S. has been caught short. Not on guns and tanks and battleships . . . but on mental might. In a high-tech age where nations increasingly compete on brainpower, American schools are producing an army of illiterates."

That kind of press attention, Kopp wrote, combined with polls showing a "new idealism" among American youth or, as she put it, "the yuppie volunteering spirit," and bolstered by "a massive recruitment and publicity effort," would propel her plan to address the shortage of qualified teachers.

"Today's average teacher comes from the bottom rungs of academic achievement," the Princeton senior explained, adding that

"children . . . view teaching as a downwardly mobile occupational choice."

Whereupon she cited some of the statistics she had dug up that illustrated how the talent pool had declined following what she described as the opening of "more prestigious, higher-paying occupations to women and minorities": Education majors scored 21 points below the national average on the verbal portion of the SAT and 34 points below the mean on the math portion in 1988. And, "Almost half of students enrolling in teacher education come from non-academic high school programs that are not intended to prepare students for college."

Having disparaged those with whom she envisioned her recruits would be working, Kopp nonetheless wrote that her idea was likely to get the support of, or at least not be opposed by, teachers' unions because "while the unions were not strong supporters of many reform measures, they for the most part refrained from mounting all-out opposition." The reality would be different. The unions would throw all kinds of roadblocks in front of Kopp (even though her corps members would always be required to join the union for their two-year stays if they were in a unionized school). For example, they tried to get school districts to block TFA recruits because they did not have training and degrees from traditional education schools, a position supported, of course, by those education schools. In her paper, Kopp had delved heavily into the fine print of these certification rules in various states and how they allowed for exceptions, but she hadn't explored the political dynamics.

Kopp also wrote (on her first page, in fact) that the TFA rookies would serve under and benefit from "the supervision of experienced teachers." As we know from what happened when Michelle Rhee, Sarah Usdin, Michael Johnston, and Jessica Reid were thrown into their classrooms, that, too, never happened.

However, Kopp got a lot right, including her core idea that despite the relatively low status accorded conventional teachers, she could make her corps a high-status cadre that would, indeed, attract the "best and the brightest."

Nonetheless, her thesis, Kopp recalls, "was hopelessly naïve, in so many ways." That kind of retrospective should be no surprise. Successful entrepreneurs acknowledge that game-changing ideas

almost always seem impossible in retrospect, so much so that, as Kopp now says, “if I had had any idea of how ridiculously hard this was going to be, I would never have tried it.”

Nor did Kopp’s initial idea envision what would be TFA’s greatest contribution. In *One Day, All Children . . .*, a book Kopp wrote in 2001 about the founding of TFA, she stated that she had thought from the start that “beyond influencing children’s lives directly” for the two years they taught, her recruits would be so sensitized by their experience that “many corps members would decide to stay in . . . education,” while others “who would go into other sectors would remain advocates for social change and education reform.” That certainly happened, beyond anyone’s expectation. Twenty years later, 67 percent of all of TFA’s 21,000 alumni would be working in public education. That’s more than 14,000 of the “best and the brightest.” There would be more than 500 TFA alums working as principals or running school districts or the best charter networks. Thousands more would be teaching or supervising (like Jessica Reid) in charter or public schools (including more than 500 who had been named “teacher of the year”). Others would be working in education-oriented foundations or think tanks. And that doesn’t count those who had gone into politics and were focusing on education.

Kopp did emphasize in her thesis that her corps would be recruited only for two-year commitments and then go on to other careers. “The best and the brightest will take a break to serve their nation,” is how she put it. However, she didn’t mention anything about midwifing this network of education reformers who might leave TFA but stay in the trenches. Nor did she write about, much less espouse, education reforms, such as evaluating and paying teachers based on performance. This is proof perhaps that the best entrepreneurs not only can overcome challenges they were oblivious of at the start but also adapt and even enhance their mission as they go.

From the moment she left the professor’s office, TFA became Kopp’s full-time work. This was fortunate because the graduating Princetonian had been rejected for jobs at an investment bank, two consulting companies, a food products company, and a commercial real estate venture.

Maybe these would-be employers could tell that Kopp wasn’t the type to throw herself into analyzing spreadsheets and management charts—a diffidence to running an enterprise that would cause her significant problems in the early years of TFA. Nor was she the kind of glad-handing Ivy Leaguer who would fake the requisite enthusiasm at these kinds of job interviews. At Princeton she had immersed herself in policy debates and related student activities, particularly the Foundation for Student Communication, which she described in her memoir as an organization “designed to bring student leaders and business leaders together to discuss pressing social issues.” One of her classmates, also involved in campus groups like this, though not this one, was Jon Schnur, the future Obama education adviser. He and Kopp were casual friends.

By her senior year, education had become the issue Kopp cared most about, and her interest had been piqued much the way Schnur’s had been when he had wondered why the smart young woman who had joined his high school newspaper staff after moving from an inner-city Milwaukee school was so far behind in basic writing skills. One of Kopp’s Princeton roommates, whom Kopp considered brilliant and creative, had come from a high school in the South Bronx. Kopp had watched as she struggled to keep up at Princeton, something that had been no problem for Kopp, who had been educated at a suburban Dallas school where everyone graduated and 97 percent went on to college (and where, she recalls, there was a \$100,000 scoreboard at the school’s \$3 million football stadium). As her roommate and others who hadn’t gone to good schools ground through an academic environment that she considered a cakewalk, Kopp began to delve into issues of education inequality. By the fall of her senior year, she was so caught up in it that she and her Foundation for Student Communication organized a conference in San Francisco of student and business leaders to talk about how to improve American public education.

Kopp explained in the preface to her thesis that the “action group” she was part of during the conference soon began “thinking about the phenomenal amount of interest that the conference participants were showing in teaching.” And, she continued, because these students— “nominated by the deans of their universities as the top students on campus”—were “certainly ‘the best and the

brightest' . . . we soon agreed that if given the opportunity, top students would join a 'Teacher Corps.' "

The best and the brightest would fix education for people like her roommate.

When Kopp returned from San Francisco, she still hadn't decided to start the Teacher Corps herself. Instead, she wrote a long letter to President George H. W. Bush suggesting that he start it. (She got a form letter back mistakenly rejecting her application for a job.)

Kopp began thinking of the corps as something she herself could do only when, after she got turned down for those five corporate jobs, she called the New York City Board of Education to find out if she could teach there in the fall while she studied for a teaching degree. She was told that there are often such openings for trainees. However, the board would not be able to tell her anything definitive until about Labor Day of the following year, long after she needed to know that she had a job and where she was going to live. Why so late? Because teaching assignments in New York and most other school systems were doled out based on seniority. Only when all the senior teachers had chosen the spots they wanted if they wanted to transfer, followed by the teachers below them on the food chain making their choices, until the most junior incumbent was placed, would the personnel office know if and where there were openings that fit the subjects Kopp might be able to teach. It was then that Kopp decided that her thesis would be her career plan.

The reasoning behind why her recruits would succeed, she says, was a departure from what she calls "the mythology of superman as the only answer for kids in tough schools." It was a mythology epitomized at the time, Kopp explains, by two popular movies. Both *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and *Lean on Me* (1989) were based on heroic figures who had, through magical powers, tamed classrooms (in the case of Jaime Escalante of *Stand and Deliver* fame in Los Angeles) or an entire school (in the case of *Lean on Me*'s Joe Clark in New Jersey). Twenty years later, Kopp would point out that the school run by Clark (played by Morgan Freeman) might have had quiet children but it had been found to be one of New Jersey's worst-performing schools once student performance data began to be tabulated. And Escalante, portrayed by Edward James Olmos, had

been given nearly super powers when, in fact, Escalante's success was attributable to unrelenting hard work and a refusal to assume his students couldn't succeed—a perseverance that echoed Jessica Reid's never-sit-down credo. Kopp was now out to find five hundred of the best and the brightest who would never sit down. They would refuse to fail because they had never failed at anything.

As Kopp was settling into New York to look for money and some like-minded crusaders to help launch TFA, a lavish conference was convened at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville to address the same issue she had now targeted as her life's work. It would be remembered as the most significant thrust ever by the federal government into the traditionally local province of K-12 education.

A Governor and a President Take Center Stage

September 27–28, 1989, Charlottesville, Virginia

George H. W. Bush was Ronald Reagan's vice president, but Bush (who had said during the 1988 New Hampshire primary campaign that he wanted to be "the education president") believed, unlike Reagan, that Washington needed to be more involved in dealing with the education crisis identified by *A Nation At Risk*. Yes, this was ultimately an issue for the states and their local school districts to deal with, but Washington, which since the days of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society had fed billions of dollars to the states in education aid, ought to do more to push them.

So Bush did something that had been done only by Teddy Roosevelt on the subject of conservation and Franklin Roosevelt when dealing with the Great Depression. He convened a summit of all of the nation's governors to address the education crisis, choosing the University of Virginia and Thomas Jefferson's nearby home, Monticello, as the venues. The purpose was for the governors and the president to agree on a national strategy, with timetables, for improvement of student performance. Since *A Nation At Risk*, there had been a lot of talk about this, particularly among the Southern governors, who saw upgraded public education as a way to bring economic development to their states. So far there had been no action to answer *A Nation At Risk*'s call to arms.

"I wake up at night with a bad dream that the education reform movement will go the way of the Hula Hoop, twist and Edsel," Arkansas's Bill Clinton told the *New York Times* on the eve of the Charlottesville summit. Clinton was the chair of the Democratic Governors Association. Along with his Republican counterpart from South Carolina, Carroll Campbell Jr., he also headed a National Governors Association education study group. The future

president would emerge as the leading force among the governors at the summit; photos of the ceremonies during the event typically had him sitting just to the left of the president he would unseat three years later.

Proclaiming that "federal funding is not the major issue" and that "accountability to taxpayers on how education money is spent" was more important, Clinton, who had already boosted his state's school system with increased aid and new teacher certification standards, was among those pushing for specific goals for reducing the disparity in achievement levels among children of different races, reducing high school dropout rates, and increasing the percentage of high school graduates going on to college.

Following a formal dinner at Monticello the first night, on the second day the Democratic and Republican governors and the Republican president emerged with a communiqué—much of it worked out by Clinton and Roger Porter, a fellow Rhodes Scholar who was Bush's chief domestic policy aide—outlining an agreement on a variety of measures. These included the establishment of national education performance goals and then annual reports on how those goals were being met, plus a call for an overhaul of state education systems to ensure, among other things, "an education system that develops first-rate teachers and creates a professional environment that provides rewards for success with students, real consequences for failure, and the tools and flexibility required to get the job done."

The UFT's Shanker, wearing his statesman's hat, praised the conference and said that President Bush's speech there had "defined a vision of public education that was not public relations."

But none of the goals was spelled out, and when they were four months later, they were watered down from what Clinton had wanted. They were more aspirational than programmatic. For example, early childhood education programs would make every preschooler "ready to learn," and American students would become "first in the world in science and math achievement." How and when were not specified. There was no blueprint for necessary funding or for school system reforms, in large part because most of the Democrats, such as New York's Mario Cuomo, thought increased federal funding ought to be the focus, while the Republicans wanted the states to undertake system reforms, not get more funds.

Twenty years later, as Schnur and Obama prepared their Race to the Top, none of the summit's goals would have been met, and in almost all areas there would be no discernible progress toward them.

Nonetheless, Clinton called the meeting a breakthrough. "This is the first time in the history of this country," he said, "that we have ever thought enough of education and ever understood its significance to our economic future to commit ourselves to national performance goals."

On those terms Clinton was right. In fact, in retrospect it could be argued that he had just defined what could be called stage one of the modern education reform movement. Beginning with *A Nation At Risk*—prepared under the auspices of a president who abhorred federal involvement in most domestic affairs, let alone in the traditionally local sphere of public education—the country had at last begun to understand, as Wendy Kopp's thesis had found, that there was a national crisis festering in our schoolrooms. Now, in Charlottesville, six years after *A Nation At Risk*, this first stage had arguably come to a close. A nationally constituted group of responsible public officials had at last rhetorically begun down the path of vowing to fix it. This wasn't enough for Bennett, Reagan's education secretary, who called the summit communiqué "pap." But for the governors and federal officials who went to Charlottesville, and for the press that covered the presidential summit, it was a big deal.

Now would come the second stage: the fight over how to fix it, in which the politicians would soon have to contend with all kinds of players—union leaders, academics, philanthropists, and ultimately Kopp's TFA troops—coming at them from all sides.

But first Wendy Kopp had to struggle with keeping her infant program alive.

Payroll to Payroll

September 1989, New York City

Kopp's budget in her thesis projected that she'd raise \$85,000 to get her through September 1989, once she moved to New York and began putting her project together. She got by on a \$26,000 grant from Mobil Oil and office space donated by Union Carbide and then Morgan Stanley. At Morgan Stanley and elsewhere, she relied heavily on her Princeton pedigree, typically seeking alumni who someone had suggested might be sympathetic.

Almost all these people told Kopp that while they liked her idea, it seemed too speculative. And most wondered aloud how an earnest, wide-eyed, soft-spoken twenty-two-year-old dirty blonde was going to run a far-flung operation like this. (Her answer—that she'd run a sixty-student volunteer group that had organized national conferences—didn't do the trick.) Others thought that the only way to improve education was to improve education graduate schools, not try an end run around them with her best and brightest getting a quick training course, then dropping by for two-year stints in the country's toughest schools before heading off to law school or the investment banks.

Kopp kept at it, becoming a stronger believer in her idea the more she heard herself explaining it to the people who turned her down. Slowly, she picked up other small grants here and there, but nothing like the additional \$2.2 million her thesis said she needed from September 1989 through when the first recruits would show up for training the following summer.

It was a hand-to-mouth struggle she would endure for five years, and things were often so bad and so down to the wire that she frequently feared she was not going to meet a payroll that had started with a support staff of two or three, increased to a half dozen (all,

like her in the first years, drawing \$25,000 salaries), and gradually became dozens of recruiters, trainers, and support people.

Kopp learned that the definition of luck in efforts like this was that after you have twenty calls or meetings in which someone deflates you almost to the breaking point with another rejection, you get “lucky,” because the twenty-first meeting is with someone who gets it immediately and agrees to write a check.

Even when she seemed to have made a breakthrough—\$300,000 from the Carnegie Foundation and then, following repeated meeting requests to her hometown philanthropist, a \$500,000 promise from Ross Perot, conditioned on Kopp’s raising a matching \$500,000—the money would soon be gone and another cash crisis was looming.

She wasn’t wasting money. Her plan to get campus reps to lure thousands of students from colleges all over the country to apply so she could pick the true five hundred best and brightest from among them was expensive. There were plane tickets to buy (Kopp got a friend of a friend to extend \$70,000 on his American Express card) and cars to rent for her crew to go campus to campus, enlisting someone on the ground to hand out flyers and hang posters for the new organization and then host initial question-and-answer meetings. Those flyers and other aspects of the “massive publicity campaign” Kopp had envisioned cost money, too, as did the travel expenses to bring in the thousands of collegians whom they had lured into applying for final interviews. And then there was the looming cost of the summer training institute—flying in the five hundred corps members, housing them, feeding them, producing materials for them, paying stipends for their time, paying teachers to train them, and renting a facility where it would all happen.

Early on, Kopp got help from Whitney Tilson, a Harvard classmate of her brother’s. Tilson, whose parents had been educators in Africa, was so taken by Kopp’s idea that he deferred a job at the Boston Consulting Group to help organize finances and operations. Personable, good-natured, and obsessively numbers oriented, he became the guy who had to tell Kopp every week or two exactly when the money was going to run out. Neither had any idea then of the pivotal role Tilson would play in the education reform movement a decade later, after he had graduated from Harvard Business School with honors and become a successful hedge-fund investor.

Somehow, Tilson, Kopp, and the others in the small band she had gathered kept the money from running out, and by the following summer, in 1990, Teach For America had gathered its first corps of 489 (11 short of the 500 projected in the thesis) for training at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. (The location would allow the trainees to get exposure to real students because Los Angeles keeps its schools open through the summer on a staggered-semester schedule.)

By all accounts, almost everything about the summer institute was a disaster: insufficient food, misinformation about whether student loans would be forgiven because the recruits had joined TFA (they wouldn’t), and, above all, the woefully slapdash training. As Michelle Rhee, Dave Levin, and Sarah Usdin would find, TFA training was not destined to get better for many years. For them and the others it would be sink or swim. One-third of those first 489 recruits would not last through their two-year commitments.

Even by 1994—after lurching from payroll to payroll for four years, and actually shrinking slightly in new recruits—TFA almost wasn’t able to open its fourth annual summer training institute because Kopp couldn’t come up with a check to pay for the facilities until a few days before it was supposed to begin.

By then, someone on Capitol Hill was taking up the same cause, though from a different angle, and with even more discouraging results.

Lighting Up the Capitol Switchboard

May 4, 1994, U.S. House of Representatives

George Miller, who had represented the Seventh Congressional District in the East Bay area of San Francisco since 1975, thought his proposal was simple common sense. If the federal government was going to give school districts across the country billions in federal aid, why not use the money to try to make schools and their teachers more effective? A lifelong Democrat who had worked as a staffer for Democrats in the state senate before running in 1974 for Congress, Miller had always enjoyed strong union support, including support from the powerful California teachers' unions.

Miller—a modest, avuncular, white-haired, and white-mustached Mark Twain-looking type, who even Republicans say is the classic unheralded real-deal public servant—had been quietly volunteering on weekends at a mostly Hispanic school in his district. As he gradually became more involved in the school's needs and operations, Miller began to think about schoolroom staffing. He kept noticing that the teachers he thought were the best and were filling gaps in the most needed subject areas were repeatedly transferring out to schools with better facilities and more learning-ready pupils. "Why can't we offer them bonuses or some kind of extra pay to stay?" he asked the principal. "It's impossible," the principal responded. "The unions would never allow it."

Miller began focusing on the talent pool from a different angle when he started visiting Indian reservations as part of his congressional duties and ran into some TFA recruits. "I saw what these people were doing—people from all kinds of great schools who were working night and day, and I kept wondering why we couldn't do something with that," he recalls. "All of their friends were going into jobs—like in Silicon Valley or on Wall Street or in the law firms—where they would get paid based on their performance. Why couldn't we do that?"

So in the spring of 1994, Miller began circulating a draft of an amendment to the federal aid to education law that would require states receiving federal aid to certify that their teachers had been qualified for the subject areas they were teaching and that their school systems had provisions in place for awarding merit pay to especially effective teachers. Initially he had lots of supporters. Then, as the time came for a vote, his allies peeled off. By the night of the vote, the teachers' unions back home and across the country had mobilized, as had conservative allies they had recruited with the argument that this was federal intrusion into local schools. The blitz was so effective that the House switchboard was shut down because of an overload of phone calls. The vote was 434–1 against.

On his way to the White House, Bill Clinton, the prime mover of the 1989 Charlottesville summit, had put his education reform zeal in a lockbox. Soon after he won the Democratic nomination in 1992, Clinton had traveled to Pittsburgh for the AFT's annual convention. The governor who had said in Charlottesville that accountability was more important than more funding now promised the cheering teachers that he would expand programs like Head Start, increase funding for vocational education, and push to make sure teachers were paid more. He said nothing about accountability.

However, five months before Miller fruitlessly pushed his teacher certification and merit pay provision, Clinton, now in the White House (where Jon Schnur was working as an education policy aide), had followed up on the Charlottesville summit with a declaration in his January 1994 State of the Union address of something he called "Goals 2000"—a set of education improvement targets to be reached by the year 2000. Clinton's plan was passed by Congress in March. It funded an education standards commission that began developing curriculum standards, although the states would volunteer, not be forced, to adopt them.

Clinton's program doubled down on the Charlottesville summit's vague goals with specifics, at least in terms of time lines. By 2000, early education programs would make all children able to start school "ready to learn." By 2000, the high school graduation rate would increase from about 70 percent to 90 percent. By 2000, American children would "be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement." By 2000, "everyone will attend a safe drug-free

school." None of these goals would be reached, yet this would create ammunition for the reformers, who would cite the failures.

In October 1994, five months after Miller was on the wrong end of the 434–1 vote, Clinton pushed through an upgrade in the Great Society federal aid to education act that would stand as one of his major domestic accomplishments. In addition to providing funds for schoolroom technology, bilingual learning, enhanced science and math teaching, and programs aimed at disadvantaged communities, the new law forced states to adopt specific achievement standards for all students. Importantly, the standards had to be the same for all, regardless of race or economic status. And the states would have to report on how they were meeting those standards, based on tests to be given to *all* students. The National Assessment of Education Progress tests, started in the 1970s, had been given only to sample sets of students in each state; now everyone at every school would get some kind of test.

The states could choose their tests and their standards, and they could, and would, otherwise game the rules. Nonetheless, this was a significant step forward. It would force the beginning of data collections across the country that would have huge ramifications into the next decade. It was the beginning of using data—however inaccurate the data might be because the tests were imperfect—to drill down and link students to increasingly more targeted sources of their performance. It started here with the states and school districts. George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind law in 2002 would push it down to individual schools. And Obama's Race to the Top would push for links to individual classrooms and teachers, which is where the real battle would begin.

Moreover, Clinton's 1994 rewrite of the old law provided for federal funding to support charter schools, which at the time were limited to a handful of early experiments in a few states. Clinton declared a goal of vastly expanding the number of charter schools. Six years later, in a May 4, 2000, visit to the City Academy high school in St. Paul, Minnesota, the nation's first charter school, Clinton announced yet another grant program for charter schools. By the end of his term at the beginning of 2001, there would be more than 1,700 charters.

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The NEA and the UFT fought the testing and charter school initiatives, especially the charter provision, but Clinton won passage after the Democratic leadership, at Miller's urging, relented. "He was the Democrats' new president," Miller says. "So there was a lot of goodwill among people here who would otherwise have toed the union line."

As these tentative pushes for reform from the Democratic side of the aisle became more frequent, and as TFA continued to expand and accumulate positive press coverage, the unions and other forces of the status quo increasingly realized that they had to push back.

The Backlash

May 1995, Rio Grande, Texas

Steven Farr was accepted into both Yale Law School and Teach For America on the same day in 1993 as he was about to graduate from the University of Texas. He decided to defer Yale and join TFA. His parents were educators, and he'd caught the bug.

Farr was sent to teach high school English and English as a second language at a mostly Hispanic border school on the Rio Grande in South Texas. Like "all of us in TFA," he says, "I had to go through the experience of experiencing failure that you've never experienced before."

Farr, like Rhee and Levin, had toughed it out and had come, he says, to love coaxing "the potential out of kids who were being lost or squelched on the Texas border."

Now, as he was finishing the final months of his second year, he suffered a different kind of setback: An article had just been published in *Phi Delta Kappan*, the most influential scholarly journal for educators, declaring that what Farr and everyone else in TFA was doing was "bad policy and bad education. It is bad for the recruits because they are ill-prepared . . . and many who might have become good teachers are instead discouraged from staying in the profession. . . . It is bad for the children because they are often poorly taught."

The author was Linda Darling-Hammond, who had been an elementary school teacher in Palo Alto before becoming a highly regarded education professor and scholar at Columbia and Stanford. However, this did not read like the work of a scholar writing for a scholarly journal. It was mostly a write-up of quotes from interviews with TFA recruits who had dropped out because TFA's inadequate training had left them unable to cope when thrown into tough classrooms, or quotes from an article written by one of those dissatisfied

recruits. To add flavor, negative quotes were cherry-picked from old newspaper articles covering TFA's start-up struggles. The positive ones—and Kopp had received tons of great press—were left out.

There was no attempt to compare learning achievement by students taught by TFA teachers with those taught by others. In part, that was not Darling-Hammond's fault. There was little if any data at the time anywhere linking student scores to teachers. That kind of data, which would empower the reformers to push for teacher accountability, was years off. Still, Darling-Hammond could have found more anecdotes of the other kind, since by then 82 percent of TFA recruits were sticking it out for the two years, up from 70 percent in the first year's class. (By 2008, the retention rate would be 92 percent.)

Supplementing the accounts from those who had failed were the kinds of broadsides rarely seen in a scholarly journal: Kopp exhibited an "absence of concern for children"; TFA recruits, she quoted one principal as saying, were people who otherwise "could not find jobs"; "Ignorance about teaching, learning and children . . . characterizes TFA's program."

Darling-Hammond's hostility to TFA and Kopp seemed personal. She seemed angry at the young Princeton grad's audacity. She all but conceded as much in one section, where she described Kopp as having come to see her when she was planning the launch of TFA. The older, wiser Darling-Hammond had advised her that programs like this had been tried before and had failed because teachers need much more training and knowledge than Kopp's plan for a summer institute could provide. But Kopp, she wrote, "maintained that she was sure she could do in a few weeks whatever it was that universities took much longer to do."

Darling-Hammond says that she wasn't "angry at anyone." Rather, she wrote the article because "I was hearing so many horror stories from principals, superintendents, and teachers that I felt I had to say something. . . . TFA is a magnificent recruiting enterprise, but so many of these people were falling through the cracks."

Darling-Hammond characterized Kopp's attitude toward her TFA corps this way: "Because of their innate superiority, they don't need—or can't be bothered with—extensive preparation for teaching." That might have been true. Yet it was also true that most TFA

recruits had succeeded and many were already starting to make their marks as great contributors to public education. In fact, a large enough majority of the TFA corps had succeeded that principals who had them in their schools were praising them, and other principals all over the country were seeking TFA recruits.

Darling-Hammond's reaction to what she called TFA's "slapdash summer institute" should have been no surprise. She had devoted her professional life to the idea that teachers need more, not less, training. Indeed, at the time she wrote this article she was a professor at the kind of institution (Columbia Teachers College) that Kopp's program sought to sidestep and was serving as the executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, a blue-ribbon panel dedicated to raising teacher training and certification standards across the country. Darling-Hammond also espoused reform. Her work as a teacher, as the co-founder of a preschool for disadvantaged children, and as a renowned scholar gave her reform bona fides. But her idea of reform was not to upset the establishment by calling for accountability or advocating for an alternative to traditional education schools. She wanted higher standards and more resources targeted at the same structure. In that sense, Darling-Hammond was one of the education establishment's favorite reformers, so much so that she had collaborated with the NEA and AFT on a variety of professionalization initiatives, such as union-run teacher-training institutes.

Darling-Hammond's article would receive wide play in the education press for years and be something Kopp would have to answer for as she sought money from donors. In the short term, with TFA constantly on the brink of insolvency, Darling-Hammond's attack was almost a death blow.

More generally, it was the beginning of a backlash against education reform. Kopp didn't see herself as being engaged in wholesale reform; she was just placing smart, motivated young teachers in schools that needed them. In fact, she hadn't said a negative word about the unions or any other part of the public education establishment or otherwise joined any of the broader reform debates. She was always careful about that (which would, in later years, be a source of frustration to the education reform network she was helping to create with her TFA corps). But Kopp was doing something that

needed to be watched, and checked. She was injecting new people, backed by a new set of supporters and donors, into the old structure. Darling-Hammond's article—its tone, its substance, its author, and its acceptance in the education community's scholarly journal—was a clear sign that Kopp's growing footprint and increasingly good press had stirred the education establishment.

For Steve Farr, who read Darling-Hammond's article one night after he got home from his high school near the Rio Grande, it was, he says, "like a punch in the gut." It jarred him into thinking that maybe what he was doing really didn't make any sense, though not for the reasons Darling-Hammond had outlined. Whatever the truth of the anecdotes she had presented (and he was aware that many of his peers had, indeed, flamed out), he knew that he was connecting with his students. Rather, Farr worried that he and others like him who were succeeding were creating what he called "islands of effectiveness" amid systemic failure. Next year, his students would be thrown back into that system. The system had to be fixed, Farr believed, to find and train good school leaders, to embed a culture of raised expectations, and to create support mechanisms that would attract, train, and continually enhance the performance of good teachers. So Farr, who had decided to reclaim his spot at Yale Law next fall, began thinking about how he might use that Yale credential to get involved in systemic school change.

Then he went back to tinkering with his lesson plan. Whatever Linda Darling-Hammond thought about his work, he knew it mattered. He had kids who were depending on him the next morning.

In the end, the success that people like Farr had in the classroom would also be the best weapon in the reformers' battle, as was about to be demonstrated by one of Farr's TFA colleagues who had a bold plan that stretched from Houston to the Bronx.

Schoolyard Classroom

August 1995, a sidewalk in the Bronx, New York

In August 1995, Dave Levin was on a hot sidewalk on 156th Street in the South Bronx, about ten blocks from Yankee Stadium (and a few blocks from where Tom Wolfe's *Master of the Universe* has the car accident that unravels his life in *Bonfire of the Vanities*). A tall twenty-six-year-old with wiry dark hair and an easy grin, Levin deftly corralled forty-six African-American and Hispanic fifth graders into a quiet circle. He greeted all of the kids warmly and joked with them before getting down to business. That was the shtick he had perfected two years earlier at TFA in Houston: Always mix fun with the dead seriousness of the mission. Wear loud Sesame Street-like neckties, but always wear a tie.

The pied piper on this Bronx sidewalk was a complicated story. At TFA in Houston, Levin had mixed all-nighters creating lesson plans or word games and obsessive engagement with his kids—phone calls, home visits, whatever it took—with more than his share of beer parties and womanizing. He was the learning-disabled kid who'd been forced out of one prestigious New York private school only to become valedictorian of another before going on to Yale.

The son of a money manager, Levin had grown up on Park Avenue, yet he seemed completely at home here, a few blocks off the seen-better-days Grand Concourse. As I would watch him later in similar settings, it was clear that he felt at home not from some sense of noblesse oblige but because he had a special quality that rendered him clueless to what to others would seem to be the incongruity of it all. He could easily banter with his new students and their parents because to him it really seemed that being here was no big deal, no more out of the ordinary than meeting someone for squash at the Yale Club.

This morning was the first day for the New York version of

the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which he and Mike Feinberg—Levin's roommate, best friend, and TFA teaching partner in Houston—had started with two KIPP classes the year before in Houston.

Their Houston program had been a great success, overcoming a parade of obstacles skillfully chronicled in *Work Hard. Be Nice*, a book about KIPP by *Washington Post* reporter Jay Mathews. With Levin itching to return home to New York and both wanting to expand their reach, they had decided to branch out. So Levin had spent much of the last twelve months commuting between Houston and New York to get approvals and space for KIPP and then to recruit the students that he and Frank Corcoran, another TFA Houston roommate, would teach.

After lots of false starts targeting one location or another, he talked a district superintendent in the Bronx into giving him space at one of the city's worst schools. This KIPP class was to be a special program for just forty-six fifth graders within PS 156. It would be five years before Levin's program would become a charter school.

Fifteen years later, KIPP schools would be so successful in boosting student performance, and so celebrated for doing so, that getting a seat in a classroom in one of the ninety-nine KIPP schools in twenty states and the District of Columbia would, literally, be the equivalent of winning a lottery. There would typically be seven to ten applications for each KIPP seat, and the winners would have to be chosen by having their numbers picked out of a spinning bowl.

But throughout the spring of 1995, Levin had struggled to fill his first forty-six seats, so much so that, as Mathews reported, he had to sneak into a middle school gymnasium to crash a general student-parent registration event (he had no credentials that the school guard would accept) so he could solicit parents and their children. Parents were skeptical of the tall white guy with the loud pastel sweater (with a KIPP logo) who promised to teach their children from dawn till dusk, and who wanted them to sign a weird KIPP "contract" committing the students to arrive on time, do all their homework, follow the strict dress codes, go on all the field trips, attend the KIPP three-week summer preparation school, and be generally committed to excellence.

This morning was the first day of that KIPP summer school.

Only it wasn't going to be *in* a school. Despite Levin's repeated pleas, the city's Board of Education had refused to allow him to use the building during the summer. When the board relented only as far as letting him come two days before the real school year began, he simply set up shop on the wide sidewalk in front of the school and then moved everyone into the schoolyard adjacent to a larger middle school for the three-week session.

Levin's and Feinberg's plans for KIPP Bronx had been two years in the making. By the end of their first TFA school year in Houston, in June 1993, they had begun having a conversation about the futility of their work that was not unlike the conversations Steve Farr, Jessica Reid, Michelle Rhee, and Michael Johnston would have with themselves: Their kids were succeeding, but now that the year was over they were destined to be thrown back into the same old system, smothered by low expectations and back in the care of adults who thought Levin and Feinberg downright strange for having created so many songs, poems, games, and other tricks to get the kids to learn, for coming to school so early and staying so late to tutor them, and, especially, for visiting their students' parents at home all the time.

Wendy Kopp recalls visiting Levin's Houston TFA class that spring and being overwhelmed with how Levin's sense of urgency—his insistence that nothing get in the way of preparing these kids for college, including a broken air conditioner on the sweltering day she was there—contrasted so strikingly with the culture of the rest of the school.

Four months later, Levin's and Feinberg's frustration had turned into a plan. One night in October, they attended a speech by Rafe Esquith, a legendary teacher visiting from Los Angeles. Esquith was known for having gotten his mostly Hispanic fifth graders to put on Shakespeare plays, tackle algebra, and otherwise crash through those low-expectation barriers.

Levin and Feinberg were mesmerized by Esquith's talk, not because he unveiled some magic that had eluded them, but because he confirmed what they thought this was all about: "It is an honor to have been chosen Disney Teacher of the year," Esquith began (according to Mathews's book about the KIPP founders), before having

a group of students he had brought with him do some Shakespeare and a few math puzzles. "But I don't think I am a better teacher than anyone else. I just work really hard at it. We believe there are no shortcuts. That's why my kids come to school from seven o'clock to five o'clock fifty weeks a year." It was also why, he said, he had the kids come back to him for tutoring for the SAT tests years later. Esquith would later write an autobiography with a prologue that began with the lyrics from Paul Simon's "The Boxer" and ended as follows: "All teachers, even the best ones, get knocked down. The difference between the best ones and the others is that the best ones always get up to answer the bell."

It was on that night that Levin and Feinberg decided to start a program that would institutionalize that no-shortcuts mission with its own extended school year schedule, its own rules for parents and students, its own curricula, its own teaching methods and associated paraphernalia (posters, rap songs, field trips), and its own high expectations for the children. The culture might be filled with games and field trips, yet it was also encased in a traditional formality, epitomized in the "SLANT" rules Levin and Feinberg promulgated: "Sit up straight. Look and listen. Ask questions. Nod your head. Track the speaker." They were determined to take all that beyond their own classroom, first with a two-class Knowledge Is Power Program in Houston in the fall of 1994 and this morning, in August 1995, in that schoolyard in the South Bronx.

April 1997, 110 Livingston Street, Brooklyn, New York

By the spring of 1997, KIPP had four teachers teaching fifth and sixth grade in the Bronx and eight teaching fourth through sixth grades in Houston. The KIPP commitment "contracts" with the students and parents were a page each, but no teacher had a contract or letter of agreement with KIPP; the teachers simply cosigned the commitment contracts that their students and parents signed.

On the other hand, the old headquarters of the New York City Board of Education at 110 Livingston Street in Brooklyn was a paper factory. The union contract now numbered 185 pages, and there was a teachers' manual four times thicker. And then there

were the “circulars”—rules issued by a large unit of the chancellor’s staff that had the force of law throughout the school system.

On April 3rd, 1997, the chancellor published *Special Circular #6*, which was sixty-seven single-spaced pages. The topic: teacher preparation and training periods, or in Livingston Street speak, the “Provision of Professional Activity Options.”

Actually, it was sixty-seven pages devoted to giving teachers an extra period off during the day, a perk they had won in their new contract negotiated a year earlier.

Before the new contract, teachers had been required to attend training sessions, cover homerooms, or do other non-classroom work two periods a day. The two periods had now been reduced to one. That wasn’t what took sixty-seven pages. The Board of Education had not wanted this to look like a giveaway to the teachers, so the contract had provided for teachers to use the extra time to engage in their own professional development activities, not those directed by the principal or anyone else. The circular prescribed how the union and administration at each school would work together to create a list of the possible activities the teacher might now engage in. There was even a time line for when these collaborative meetings would take place, along with a process and time line laid out for finding aides to replace teachers for duties they would no longer carry out.

It all seemed pretty business-like and specific, in terms of what the new “professional development” activities would be. Except that buried in a paragraph on page four, the chancellor declared that these “professional activities will be self-directed and do not require a teacher to be in a specific location at a set time.” In other words, it was an extra period off—another accommodation between the unions and the bureaucrats that was good for the adults. It was as if taking away that teacher preparation time didn’t matter to the kids when, in fact, an expanding circle of academics and other researchers were now finding that quality teacher time was what mattered most.

The Discovery: “Good Teaching Matters”

June 1998, Washington, D.C.

Kati Haycock has been an affable but persistent advocate for education equity since the 1970s. In 1994, she had left a top position at the Children’s Defense Fund, the civil rights group founded by Marian Wright Edelman, to start the Education Trust, a Washington-based foundation whose mission was research and advocacy on issues related to closing the education gap between minorities and the poor and the rest of America’s children.

In the June 1998 edition of the trust’s research journal, *Thinking K–16*, Haycock published an article, which she wrote herself, that would do more to shake up conventional wisdom about public school teaching and learning and do more to alienate her from the education establishment than anything else the Education Trust had written or said in its four years. This, despite the fact that the article’s title seemed obvious and flattering: “Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap.”

Haycock and her staff had discovered that although linking student test scores to school districts was just beginning as part of the Clinton administration’s education initiatives, there were school systems in Tennessee, Alabama, Massachusetts, and Dallas, Texas, that had been doing that for years and had also taken the further step of making it possible to link the testing data to specific teachers. And, Haycock had found, several academics, led by Stanford’s Eric Hanushek, had been crunching the data and finding compelling evidence that the quality of the person in front of the classroom really mattered.

A study in Tennessee had sorted teachers into five levels (lowest, second lowest, middle, second highest, highest) based on the performance gains their students made during the school year in reading

and math. When teachers in the lowest group were then compared with the 20 percent of teachers in the highest group in terms of how much they improved student performance in a subsequent year, the differences were dramatic: "Students whose initial achievement levels are comparable have 'vastly different academic outcomes as a result of the sequence of teachers to which they are assigned,'" Haycock wrote, quoting the findings of the University of Tennessee's William Sanders. The differences were also long-lasting: "Differences of this magnitude—50 percentile points—are stunning," Haycock continued. "As all of us know only too well, they can represent the difference between . . . entry into a selective college and a lifetime at McDonald's."

In Dallas, Haycock reported, "the average reading scores of a group of fourth graders who were assigned to three highly effective teachers in a row rose from the 59th percentile in fourth grade to the 76th percentile by the conclusion of sixth grade. A fairly similar (but slightly higher-achieving) group of students was assigned three consecutive ineffective teachers and fell from the 60th percentile in fourth grade to the 42nd percentile by the end of sixth grade. A gap of this magnitude—more than 34 percentile points—for students who started off roughly the same is hugely significant."

Almost from the moment her article was published, Haycock started receiving calls and e-mails from teachers' union officials in Washington demanding to know why she was bashing teachers. The unions and groups like Haycock's, which typically advocated for more resources to be poured into schools in poor or minority communities, had been natural allies. The data threatened to drive a wedge between them.

"The teachers' organizations had been enormously successful in painting all teachers as underpaid, wonderful educators," Haycock recalls. "They immediately attacked, taking the position that anything critical about any teacher is an attack on all teachers, when in fact by then it was clear that a lot of people from the bottom of the college pool were going into education."

The reaction to Haycock's article also exposed fissures between the union and at least some of its members. "We also got e-mails from individual teachers, warm e-mails," Haycock says, "that said, 'We always knew we mattered. How wonderful to see some real data.'"

That summer, Haycock realized that "teachers' organizations have this weird view of their constituency. They want to say they are all in it to change kids' lives. Then, when we present data that say, 'Yes, you can change lives,' and, 'Yes, you really matter,' they say, 'No, we're powerless. It's about race, or poverty, or something else.'"

Haycock's dissemination of that research was the beginning of a flood of similar scholarly work, much of which would be financed by a data-obsessed wonk named Bill Gates. It would reframe the education debate by turning an intuitive notion—shared by anyone who has ever sat in class with a great teacher and a lousy one—into empirical data. The data, in turn, would be ammunition for what was becoming a growing network of reformers.

The Network

October 1999, PS 156, the Bronx

After Whitney Tilson had helped Wendy Kopp juggle finances and operations following his graduation from Harvard in June 1989, he had gone back to his plan to work for the Boston Consulting Group. From there he had enrolled at Harvard Business School, then worked with a Harvard professor studying inner-city businesses. In January 1999, using \$1 million from his parents, money from relatives, and some of his own money, Tilson launched his own fund, now called T2 Partners. He called it a "value fund," meaning he was a "contrarian" who looked for value in stocks and other investments where others didn't see it.

Tilson was good at it. Within six years he would amass, he says, more than \$50 million in his fund from 120 wealthy investors. He was, he says, consistently beating the Standard & Poor's stock index, and was writing a widely followed newsletter called *Value Investor Insight* while running a popular annual conference for investors. At the same time, Tilson got involved in various liberal causes and charities, something he attributes to the fact that his parents were "the original flower children—Peace Corps, educators in Tanzania, the whole thing."

One morning in October 1999, Tilson got a call from a friend who had participated with Tilson in some charity events and fundraisers for Democratic candidates. "Hey, have you ever heard of Teach For America?" the friend asked. "I helped start it ten years ago," Tilson responded.

The friend now wanted Tilson to see Teach For America in action in New York so that he might be encouraged to donate. Tilson agreed, and a few afternoons later they went to a high school in the Bronx, where Tilson was duly impressed watching a few of the TFA corps members performing in front of their classes. Then the friend

walked Tilson over to the middle school next door to see something started by a TFA alum, called KIPP.

Hiking up to the fourth floor, Tilson came into a hallway where on one side of an open fire door there was the chaos one might expect in one of the South Bronx's toughest schools. On the other side, as they were greeted by Dave Levin, Tilson saw youngsters in uniforms filing quietly through the halls on their way to class. In fact, what Levin remembers seemed to stun Tilson the most was that the children on the noisy side were running up and down the hall but would come right up to the line where the fire door was and stop, "like it was the DMZ or Checkpoint Charlie."

Tilson's amazement continued as he watched a math class, where the fifth graders were doing complicated algebra, then an English class where they were discussing essays in a way that almost reminded him of a Harvard English class. "It was," he says, "completely electrifying. I just couldn't believe it."

Tilson quickly became involved in raising money for KIPP. More than that, he was so intrigued by what Levin was doing that he began reading up on education reform and e-mailing the articles to Levin.

Soon Tilson's clipping service was so good that Levin suggested he send it to a list of friends who were also involved in education, people such as Mike Feinberg, Levin's KIPP partner in Houston; Sarah Usdin, now working for TFA in Louisiana; and Jon Schnur, who was helping the Gore presidential campaign part-time while enrolled at Harvard's Kennedy School. Within five years, there would be hundreds of people on Tilson's e-mail list, then more than four thousand by 2010. By then, there would be so much activity and controversy related to education reform that Tilson found himself sending two or three clip-filled e-mails a week, which was more often than he e-mailed his network of investors.

"As I'm Sure Mr. Schnur Knows"

October 1999, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Michael Johnston, the Yalie from Colorado who had taught for TFA in the Mississippi Delta for two years, had come to the Ken-

nedy School after having been brushed off by Greenville, Mississippi, school officials when he suggested how they might restructure things to make the school work better. When he got to Cambridge, he cross-enrolled in a Harvard Business School class called Entrepreneurship in the Social Sector. It seemed like a good course for someone who wanted to change the nation's schools.

A few weeks into the class, in October 1999, Johnston's professor had turned to education and education reform, including charter schools. Johnston soon noticed that for this session, the professor began several sentences with, "As Mr. Schnur probably knows . . ." or "As Mr. Schnur could no doubt tell you . . ."

Who was this Mr. Schnur?

After class, Johnston asked around and found that there was a guy named Jon Schnur, also at the Kennedy School and also cross-enrolled in the B-School class, who had worked in the Clinton White House on education issues and was now moonlighting as an education policy adviser to the Gore presidential campaign.

Johnston found Schnur and introduced himself, and the two hit it off immediately. Within a few weeks they and two classmates were working on a paper for the class that would become the business plan for something called New Leaders for New Schools.

Schnur and Johnston quickly realized that they shared a belief that what really mattered in fixing schools was getting better teachers and better principals. And no one and no organization out there was doing anything to improve the talent pool of principals—to find new leaders for new schools who would have two core competencies: the drive and ability to observe, supervise, and improve their teachers' classroom performance, and the management skills to use their school's manpower and money effectively. State principal certification exams didn't screen for that, the two knew.

Their idea was to create a nonprofit organization that would recruit prospective principals from among star teachers and even non-teachers who were interested in making their marks in education. They would train them intensely, place them in charter schools or public school systems looking for new blood, then provide support and training once they were placed. The work would be financed by donations and government grants, as well as placement fees from the charter schools that hired the recruits.

Their plan for NLNS was a finalist in the Business School's business plan contest, although blueprints for nonprofit ventures were not the contest's usual fare. More than that, Schnur actually launched it the following year, while Johnston went off to Yale Law School.

NLNS, which would become Schnur's base for his education reform work, quickly made its mark. Within two years it had raised \$5 million and was placing principals in New York and Chicago public schools and in several charter schools. By 2010, the organization would have trained more than seven hundred school leaders.

Tilson, Schnur, and Johnston all thought of themselves as committed Democrats. It was a Republican president who was about to give their movement another push forward.

No Child Left Behind

January 8, 2002, the White House

Al Gore walked away from Jon Schnur's education accountability reform message in the 2000 campaign, but George W. Bush embraced it. Bush had made school accountability a hallmark of his Texas governorship. In Texas and then on the campaign trail, he had decried "the soft bigotry of low expectations" that allowed failing schools simply to continue to fail.

Through the first year of his presidency, Bush had worked with, among others, Democrats Ted Kennedy on the Senate side and George Miller on the House side on a school reform agenda. His new version of the 1960s Great Society's aid to education act—which he called No Child Left Behind, and which he signed in the White House on January 8, 2002—mandated that in return for federal funds, all states had to keep track of the performance of the students in their schools, using the same standards across the state for tests given to all students in different grades. The states also had to measure performance by various categories of race in order to quantify achievement gaps. Moreover, the states were required to develop plans to take over and turn around what were called "persistently failing" schools—schools that were failing to make "adequate yearly progress" toward 100 percent student proficiency by 2014.

For a Republican to assert this much federal intrusion in state and local education was extraordinary, but the bill passed with broad support from both parties. Some in the education establishment, including the unions, feared that NCLB, as No Child Left Behind came to be called, would scapegoat schools whose populations were not destined to make the required yearly progress. They went along because in this post-9/11 bipartisan period there was little chance they could stop the bill, especially with all the extra funding it promised school systems.

In the years following No Child Left Behind, the Bush administration would be criticized for not funding it fully enough, a difficult argument given that federal education funding increased by 40 percent through 2007. It is true, though, that states soon began to game the system by defining their standards of proficiency down.

Those two criticisms ignore what was really the breakthrough forged by NCLB. For the first time, all across the country, student performance was being tied to every school, and demographics were being tied to every measure.

The old National Assessment of Education Progress tests had been administered to only a sample of students in each state and could gauge only a state's overall performance, or perhaps that of a school district if anyone bothered to parse those numbers. Clinton's changes to the law had advanced testing so that every child was tested in every school, but children's year-to-year progress could not be measured, because only one grade in elementary, middle, and high school had to be tested.

Now, with No Child Left Behind, every student would be measured every year in grades three through eight. This meant that teachers could begin to be measured based on how much, for example, a fourth-grade teacher advanced his or her students from their third-grade reading and math levels—if someone wanted to do the measuring.

Eight months after the passage of President Bush's No Child Left Behind, a former member of the Clinton administration would try to use the data it provided to overhaul the country's largest school system.

“Don’t Worry, It’s Just a Parent”

August 19, 2002, 110 Livingston Street, Brooklyn

August 19, 2002, was Joel Klein’s first day on the job as the New York City schools chancellor. Making his way to his office after navigating through the security process at the Board of Education headquarters in Brooklyn (which, after cleaning out two-thirds of the staff, he would soon abandon in favor of a building next to City Hall in Manhattan), Klein saw that a light on his phone console was blinking. “Don’t we need to answer that?” he asked his new assistant, a veteran of the office he had just assumed and someone who, he recalls, looked at him as if certain she’d still be there when he, like the chancellors before him, had departed. “Oh, no,” she said. “That’s just some parent on hold who called complaining about something. If you let it blink long enough, she’ll go away.”

It was probably that morning that Klein began using a phrase that he would still repeat to friends multiple times a day eight years into his job: “You just can’t make this stuff up.” To closer friends, and his wife, Nicole Seligman, the general counsel of the Sony Corporation, it was more likely to be, “You just can’t make this shit up.” Although Klein and his wife now traveled in Manhattan’s splashiest business and media circles, Klein had grown up across the 59th Street Bridge in Astoria, Queens, the son of a postal worker. He still spoke more like a kid from Astoria than a Harvard-trained lawyer responsible for educating more children than anyone else in America.

Klein was two months from his fifty-sixth birthday. He was already balding, with tufts of hair sticking over his shirt collar in the back and on the sides, and he still dressed as if he was at his law firm.

He is a workaholic. Subordinates, friends, even parents of New York City schoolkids would soon become accustomed to his habit of BlackBerrying back a response to most e-mails within minutes,

even while sitting on the dais at some official event or catching a Yankees game. (He and his wife are manic Yankees fans.)

Klein is one of those Ivy Leaguers with an off-the-charts résumé that suggests that if the best and the brightest can do anything, he can probably do anything even better: Phi Beta Kappa from Columbia College, *Harvard Law Review*, a Supreme Court clerkship, the founder of an elite Washington law firm specializing in high-stakes appeals, deputy White House counsel under Bill Clinton, head of the antitrust division of the Justice Department, where he’d made headlines suing Bill Gates into a settlement. Then, in a daring jump out of law and government, he had taken the top American job at the German media conglomerate Bertelsmann AG, where he was responsible for businesses ranging from Random House books to Sony BMG Music to Gruner + Jahr Magazines.

In the spring of 2002, just after he became New York’s mayor, Michael Bloomberg won control of the schools following a battle with the Albany legislature. Bloomberg had not talked about school reform in his 2001 mayoral campaign the way he and Klein later would discuss it—in terms of eliminating union protections. However, along with promising to pay teachers more, he had made seizing control of the schools and turning them around a key campaign promise.

Bloomberg is a billionaire who, having been passed over for promotion at an investment bank, got his revenge by building the fabulously successful financial data and media company that bears his name. As CEO, he was famous in media circles as a tough (but generously paying) boss who insisted on a clear chain of command that stopped at his desk. So Bloomberg had instinctively recognized that the post-Ocean Hill-Brownsville crazy quilt of school districts sharing power with a board of education appointed by multiple elected officials was no way to run anything. Someone—the mayor—needed to be in charge. Albany legislators had ultimately acquiesced in the change, in part because Bloomberg had become the lead financial benefactor of the state’s Republican Party, and in part because the Democrats knew the schools were a shambles, making any defense of the status quo untenable.

The United Federation of Teachers at first fought mayoral control but gave in when, as Randi Weingarten later explained to me, “We realized he was likely to win in Albany anyway and we agreed that

there was a power vacuum. I also believed Mike [Bloomberg] when he promised me that he would be collaborative with us in filling the vacuum. Besides, who would have dreamed he would appoint someone like Joel?"

The idea of Klein's running the schools actually came from Margaret Carlson, then a *Time* magazine columnist and longtime friend of both Klein and Bloomberg.

When he was twenty-three, Klein had taken a leave of absence from Harvard Law School to spend a year studying education and teaching math to sixth graders in Queens. He had also dabbled in education while in Washington as an informal adviser to the District of Columbia's mayor. That might not have been enough experience for most mayors who had just pushed a plan to seize responsibility for the city's 1,200 public schools by daring voters to vote him out in four years if he didn't improve them. However, Carlson knew that Bloomberg was a big believer in the notion that winners could win on any field. One day, as Bloomberg was talking to her about his need for someone to come in and shake up the school system, Carlson touted her friend Joel.

Bloomberg and Klein met for more than an hour before Memorial Day weekend at Bloomberg's Upper East Side town house. Klein didn't think he had connected with Bloomberg and was surprised when the mayor called in mid-June and invited him for coffee. After about an hour and a half, Bloomberg offered him the job, telling him he should focus on picking a team and making one or two big moves early.

"Jesus Christ wasn't available . . . and I thought Joel was smart and tough as nails for a job that really required that," says Bloomberg.

Klein spent his time off between jobs in June and July reading as much as he could—books on the history of education, books about charter schools, a book about the importance of principals as school-house leaders, articles like Kati Haycock's about teacher effectiveness and the data that could identify it, monographs about the structure of school systems (few of which seemed to agree). He began meeting or calling as many people as he could find who understood school systems and education, traditionalists and reformers. In the beginning he didn't know enough to appreciate the difference, let alone which side all the players were on.

Klein spent a lot of time consulting with Alan Bersin, who was running the San Diego schools. Klein knew Bersin from his Justice Department days because Bersin had been the United States attorney in San Diego before taking the schools job. Like Klein, Bersin is a New Yorker from an outer borough (Brooklyn), an Ivy League lawyer (Yale), and former Supreme Court clerk who had had no background in education.

Bersin had done his own tour of the literature before taking the job and had found, he told Klein, that "while you could play along the edges with structural changes, the core business of education is teaching." However, the people who run school systems, Bersin had concluded, "would rather concentrate on rearranging the deck chairs, because trying to touch teaching was the third rail. . . . Everyone in the system, especially teachers, will fight you. They'll tell you it isn't their fault—that it's all about poverty and demographics. They will attack you and try to get rid of you."

"It didn't even take me ninety days," Bersin told Klein, "before I went from being a Democrat who always thought the unions were the good guys to realizing that unions were not the good guys—that the Democratic Party and the school reform movement had run into a rock because of the transformation of the teachers' union movement from the '60s to the '90s from a progressive force to the most conservative force in the mix."

Bersin—who would ultimately be forced out of San Diego in 2005 when the teachers' union successfully backed new candidates to take over the school board—told Klein that he needed to pick his fights carefully and one at a time. "Don't burn down all the bedrooms in the house at once," he advised. He also warned Klein that he had to start by putting into schools principals whom he could hold accountable. "The word 'principal,'" he told Klein, "comes from 'principal teacher.' It all starts with them." Then, he said, Klein had to make sure the principals could hold their teachers accountable.

Bersin's advice matched how Bloomberg had instructed Klein: Pick the right team that will build a system of accountability at the school level and then at the classroom level.

It should not have been hard to predict that the New York City teachers' union contract—which by 2002 was 206 pages, much of which was devoted to protecting teachers from being judged by

management—was about to collide with two executives whose religion was the merit-based accountability that Bersin was preaching. Klein's was the résumé of one of the meritocracy's ultimate winners. Bloomberg's company had been famous in media circles for being the ultimate sink-or-swim shark tank. Not even the top executives had contracts. They could be at their desks one day and gone the next if the boss decided they weren't producing.

Klein knew that the union contract required lockstep seniority compensation and teachers' choice of classroom assignments based on their seniority and that it all but guaranteed them lifetime tenure. However, he didn't read the actual contract until after he had been on the job for a few weeks. Only then did he begin to see that those contract constraints and more were layered over with all kinds of byzantine procedures for teachers to engage in a long, three-stage grievance process, in which they could protest just about anything related to how they were managed by their principals. It was another "You just can't make this stuff up" moment.

Meeting Michelle

August 2002, New York City

Wendy Kopp was exasperated at first that the new mayor would think that "some lawyer" was what the school system needed. Yet when Klein called her right after his appointment, she says, "I could see that he was approaching this from the point of view of changing the whole system. It was clear that he was calling hundreds of people, trying to find out how to overhaul everything." As their conversation shifted to how TFA teachers were placed in New York City schools and how Klein could get more of them, Kopp mentioned that there was another program supplying ambitious young teachers in New York called NYC Teaching Fellows. It was run, she said, under the auspices of something called the New Teacher Project by a young woman named Michelle Rhee—the Baltimore TFA teacher who had used all those shapes and cards and other physical objects to turn her math class around. Like her TFA corps, Kopp explained, recruits from Rhee's NYC Teaching Fellows would have

tracts when it came to throwing themselves into their work. Call Michelle, Kopp suggested.

In the fall of 1995, Kopp had finally reached an even keel; revenues from donations and government grants were slightly exceeding expenses. One way she had done that had been by shutting down an ambitious offshoot she had established three years earlier called TEACH, which had been intended to fill the gap in TFA's training by becoming a separate unit that would help train TFA recruits and other teachers being recruited through alternative career paths. The plan had been that TEACH would not only solve TFA's training problems but also help financially, because it could raise money separately, plus get grants or fees from those other participating school systems. TEACH had improved TFA training, but the business plan had been a disaster, so Kopp had closed it (while keeping some of its training capacity).

However, Kopp hadn't given up on the idea of a broader organization that could put more of the best and brightest into schoolrooms. So in 1997, with TFA on its feet financially, she had secured a grant to start a separate nonprofit corporation, the New Teacher Project, that would recruit and train a new breed of teachers. To run it, she recruited Rhee, her Baltimore TFA alum, who had just graduated from the Kennedy School with a master's degree in public policy.

Rhee had been immediately tempted by Kopp's offer. But one skill that the Kennedy School had not taught her was how to do a business plan. She went to a bookstore and bought everything she could find about writing business plans. She tried, she says, "about twenty drafts, which kept sucking less and less." In fact, Rhee came up with a solid plan to make the New Teacher Project a consultancy that would draw charitable contributions while also getting fees from the school systems whose teachers it recruited and trained. It had turned out to be a good deal for school districts looking to break the cycle of recruiting teachers only from the traditional graduate schools of education.

By 2002, Rhee's New Teacher Project was supplying teachers in the mold of the TFA recruits to school districts across the country, including 1,300 in the last year to New York City through its NYC Teaching Fellows program.

By now Rhee was used to getting calls from politicians and

school district bosses, like Klein, who would inquire about what the New Teacher Project did, say how good its Teaching Fellow program sounded, then take months to get back to her, if they did at all. Injecting new blood into school systems was not for the faint of heart. So she was amazed not only that when Klein called he spent more than an hour questioning her, but also that he called back in about two weeks, after he'd been in office a few days, to ask if she could double that 1,300 next year.

Klein had big plans on that and other fronts. But first he had to figure out where all the bodies were buried in the bureaucracy he had inherited.

Outside Money

October 3, 2002, New York City

In the 1950s, Eli Broad was an accountant who noticed that his home-building clients seemed to be making a lot more money than he was. So he and a cousin of his wife, Edythe, started Kaufman and Broad, a home-building company specializing in houses for the growing middle class. By 1999, after having diversified into mortgage banking, Broad sold his Los Angeles-based business for \$18 billion, netting what he says was several billion for his family. It was then that he expanded a smaller foundation he had started in the 1970s into the \$2 billion Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation.

Broad decided to make public education a priority because, having traveled widely in Asia and Europe, he had seen how far America's schools were falling behind.

"I didn't know anything about curricula and had no idea how to teach," he says, "so we decided to focus on governance and management of school systems." The effort had begun inauspiciously, with millions invested in an institute intended to train people elected or appointed to local school boards. "It didn't work," he says, "because they'd learn management or finance or human resources and get all enthusiastic and then go home and fall into the same traps of doing things the way they were always done, and hiring the same people they always hired."

Broad had then started a Superintendents Academy, which was more successful. It spread a new breed of school executives across school systems all over the country. He also started supporting Schnur's New Leaders for New Schools with a \$1.3 million grant, and Wendy Kopp, beginning with a \$800,000 grant to Teach For America to help fund her third year. By 2010, Broad would be one of the largest donors to TFA.

"What we had come to believe," says Broad, "was that our money could work best where we found real change agents to make it work." Thus, except for supporting charter school start-ups (he would ultimately become one of KIPP's largest benefactors), he had shied away from providing support in his hometown of Los Angeles or, despite repeated requests, to school programs in New York City, because, he says, "I knew that the teachers' union was running the show."

Now, thanks to Alan Bersin, who had gotten seed money from Broad for some of his initiatives in San Diego, Broad saw an opening in New York. Bersin told Broad about Klein's background and the conversations they had been having and suggested that Broad reach out to him. Klein seems to be just the kind of change agent that you like to invest in, Bersin told Broad.

So Broad called Mayor Bloomberg, an old friend, and said he'd like to help his new schools chief. Broad and Klein spoke the day after Klein's appointment was announced.

"I've got the money, but I've never gotten the reform," Broad told Klein. "Maybe you can get the reform."

Klein told Broad that he had one immediate problem: "I have all these people—thousands—who work for me but who don't teach and aren't principals. I don't have a clue about what they do and they sure as hell aren't going to tell me what they do."

Broad agreed to help, and also invited Klein to a conference he was convening in a few weeks of education reform people from around the country. It was there that Klein met Schnur. They became fast friends and were soon talking to or e-mailing each other once a week or more, exchanging ideas. "Schnur seemed to know everyone and everything that was happening," Klein recalls.

On October 3, 2002, less than two months after his first conversation with Klein, Broad stood with Klein and the mayor in the ro-

tunda of the elegant old Tweed Courthouse that backed onto City Hall and that Bloomberg and Klein had converted to the New York City Department of Education's new headquarters. There Broad announced that he and a close friend, legendary hedge-fund manager Julian Robertson, had donated \$3.75 million for Klein to begin a top-to-bottom study aimed at completely restructuring the school system to eliminate bureaucracy and provide better service to the city's 1.1 million schoolchildren.

Klein told the assembled press that the money would fund the plans for Children First: A New Agenda for Public Education in New York City.

"The simple, universally acknowledged fact is that our schools are not doing the job they must and should do for our kids," Klein declared. "These circumstances call for dramatic action."

The UFT's Weingarten praised the plan. "The big difference between what Joel just said today and the normal studies we hear about," she gushed, "is that this time he talked more about parents and classrooms and schools and principals and how they interact and how kids get a better education than he talked about central bureaucracy."

"I wasn't sure what Randi meant, but I figured, 'What the hell,'" Klein recalls. "If she's going to go along, fine."

"The Union Won't Allow It"

November 2002, New York City

As Klein pushed to bring in more of Michelle Rhee's NYC teaching fellows, he was told that the UFT was pushing back, saying that the fellows were less effective in the classroom than those who had conventional credentials. Klein's instinct was otherwise. However, he figured, why debate something that was knowable? So he called in a human resources executive and asked, lawyer-like, whether the school had test scores that they could compare from one year to the next for specific students. (Klein knew that even before No Child Left Behind was to take effect, New York did its own testing.)

Yes, we do, the HR specialist said.

So, Klein continued, was there a way, after measuring improvement on those scores for given students over a given year, to link that improvement to the specific teachers who taught those students?

"Well, I guess that would be possible, theoretically."

"So how about we take a sample of, say, one hundred or five hundred kids taught by teaching fellows and compare their progress in a year to one hundred or five hundred kids not taught by the teaching fellows? Could we do that?"

"I guess in theory we could, but we can't."

"Whaddya mean, we could but we can't?"

"The union will never stand for it."

"Does anything in the contract prohibit us from doing that? I mean, we just want to take a sample, so we can have a look and see if these teaching fellows are any good."

There was nothing in the contract, per se, that didn't allow it, the HR person explained, but, he insisted, "I know I will never get anyone here to do it. The union will be furious."

"Well, what if I want you to do it and I tell you to do it?" Klein pressed.